Staying Ahead

By Lt. David Stern

When I was preparing to leave for flight school, I remember a close family friend, who had been a pilot for many years, telling me, "The three most useless things to an aviator are the altitude above you, the runway behind you, and 10 seconds ago." I put that advice in my pocket and didn't think about it much until four years later, when I was one month into my first deployment as an SH-60B pilot.

Our ship, an *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyer, was transiting unaccompanied through the Indian Ocean (IO), en route to the Northern Arabian Gulf. It was monsoon season in the IO, and we were experiencing the typical weather for the season: 10-to-15-foot seas, 30-knot winds, and isolated rain showers. Both of the detachment's aircraft had been down for maintenance since we had passed through the Straits of Malacca a day earlier. The detachment pilots were anxious to start flying again and work on currency requirements.

We launched before sunset and had planned to conduct SAR training and identifying surface contacts ahead of the ship's plan of intended movement (PIM). Forty-five minutes after launching, our sensor operator (SO) notified the crew a return on our surface-search radar indicated a significant line of weather in front of our ship's PIM. The weather stretched across the entire radar horizon, approximately 60 miles. We had about 1.5 hours before the ship would drive into the leading edge of the weather.

Our scheduled recovery time still was 2.5 hours away. We discussed our options and decided we would recover early. We told the ship of the situation and requested flight quarters be set in one hour. That would have us on deck 30 minutes before the ship entered the heavy weather. In any event, the ship always could turn around and steam away from the weather if it looked like we would be cutting it close.

We had a solid plan—so we thought.

We watched the weather and the ship close each other on radar, and we knew our timeline increasingly was becoming tight. The ship was taking too long to set flight quarters, and the weather was moving faster than expected. The winds also had picked up to the point where, if the ship turned away from the weather, the winds would be outside the limits of the recovery envelope. Ten minutes before our rescheduled recovery time, we plunged into the weather, and everything outside turned black. Rain covered the windshield, and the aircraft shook from the turbulence. Looking outside was not only useless but disorienting, so I concentrated like never before on my flight instruments. On radar, the heavy weather surrounded us for miles, and we knew we didn't have the fuel to wait it out.

Why had we cut it so close? I began to wonder about diverting to India, which was 60 miles to the east. While we waited for a green deck and orbited at the initial-approach fix (IAF) for the shipboard TACAN approach, I couldn't see any of the ship's lights. Once cleared, I commenced the approach and picked up the masthead light three-quarters of a mile out, and the flight deck at one-half mile out. I flew a slow and steady approach, but because of the now 40-knot headwind, low visibility, and intense rain, we ended up in a high hover aft and left of the flight deck. At this point, the helicopter-aircraft commander (HAC) in the left seat lost sight of the flight deck and called for a waveoff. Still having the landing environment in sight and not

Please send your questions, comments or recommendations to: Ted Wirginis, Code 10B
Naval Safety Center
375 A St., Norfolk, VA 23411-4399
(757) 444-3520, ext. 7271 (DSN-564)
E-mail: theodore.wirginis@navy.mil

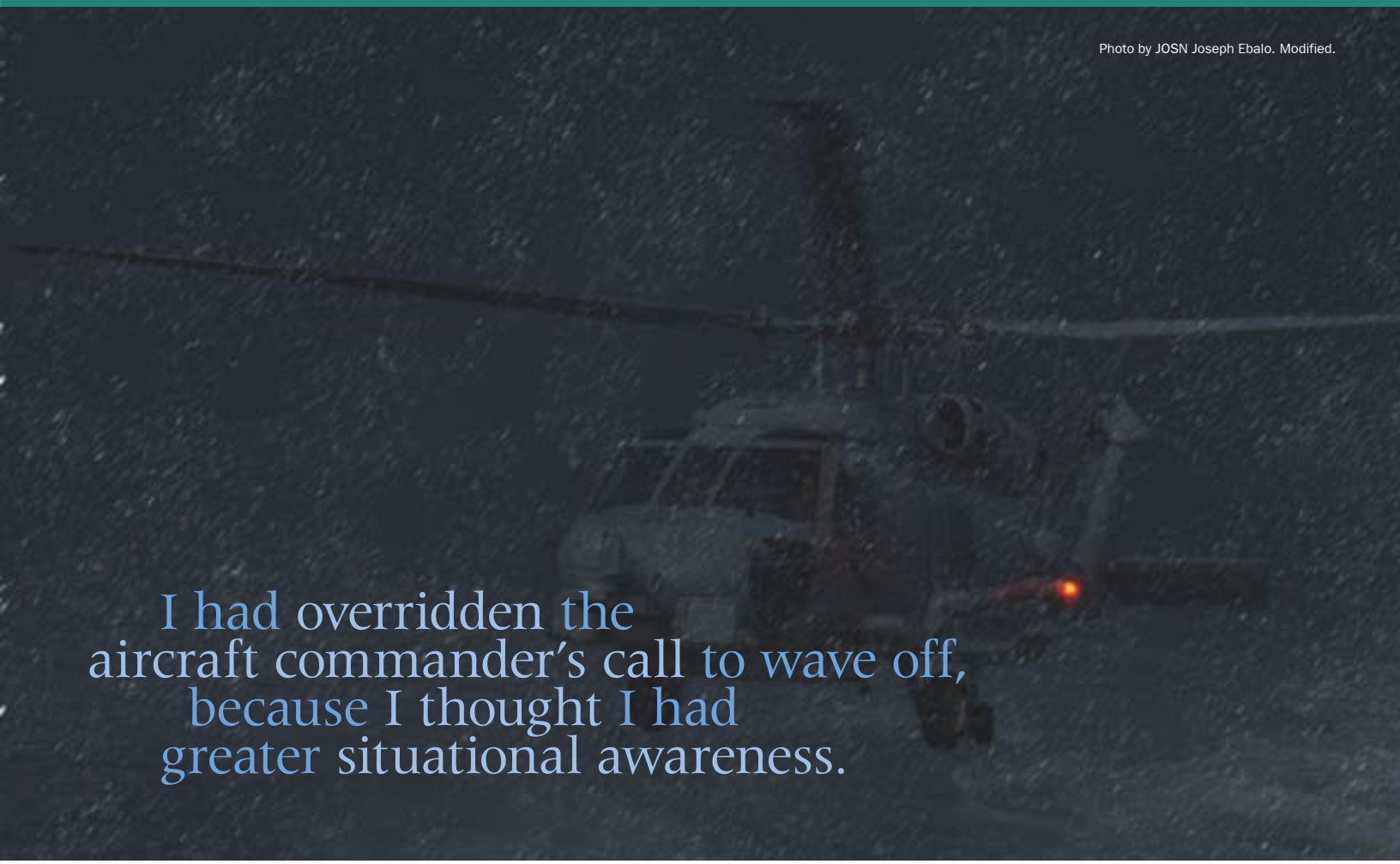

Photo by JOSN Joseph Ebalo. Modified.

I had overridden the aircraft commander's call to wave off, because I thought I had greater situational awareness.

wanting to face the challenging transition back into the blackness of the storm, I said I only needed to come down and slide right to regain the center of the deck. With no response from the HAC, I took silence as consent and continued my approach to an uneventful landing into the trap.

I was glad we were safe on deck but felt guilty I had usurped the HAC's decision to wave off. I felt foolish for not having avoided the whole situation by recovering much earlier.

We had discussed the weather in our NATOPS brief but had not discussed how far in advance we would recover if things got worse. We also had not briefed the emergency-divert possibility and were caught unprepared. We reevaluated and made the right decision to recover early. But, having missed several flights during the preceding days, we cut our recovery time too close in an ill-advised attempt to get as much out of the flight as possible.

At the end of the approach, I had overridden the aircraft commander's call to wave off, because I thought I had greater situational awareness. In doing so, although I had recovered safely, I wrongfully overruled his authority and broke down our crew-resource management. During the debrief, we discussed both the good and bad decisions we had made, but inevitably, we had put ourselves in a situation which easily could have been avoided had we simply heeded the wisdom of an old aviator's advice.

Lt. Stern flies with HSL-37.